

# Political Gender Equality in Nigeria: The Other Side of the Coin

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## Abstract

Promoting gender equality has become a recognized and an acceptable reality and trend globally. In Nigeria, gender issues have been identified as central to the accomplishment of national development goals and objectives. Although, the policy is designed to bring a gender perspective into all facets of planning, including developing legislation that will address the inequalities between women and men in Nigeria, the dysfunctional role of the political sphere of the gender policy question that seeks to balance the power relations between men and women has been largely ignored and relatively unstudied. This paper therefore attempts an examination of the dysfunctional role of political gender equality both at the micro (family) and macro (society) levels in Nigeria. The paper, which utilized valuable secondary sources of data, contends that the political equality drive in Nigeria will accentuate the family and social dislocation that industrialization and its concomitant family pressures have created. The paper further argues that, the existing gaps in the Nigerian family setting occasioned by the abdication of the God-given, natural, home-keeping responsibilities of the women will be further complicated by the full-blown women empowerment typified by complete access to the political space in Nigeria. This paper equally asserts that the myriad of social problems manifesting in armed robbery, prostitution and youth restiveness will become hydra-headed. This assertion derives from the thinking that the core values that promote the sound functioning of the family and strengthen the fabric of society are gradually and steadily decaying and eroding. The paper concluded with some useful remarks.

**Keywords:** political gender equality, Nigeria, the other side.

## 1. Introduction

Promoting gender equality is acceptably a sine-qua-non to the actualization of the protection of fundamental human rights. It is also central to the whole question of human development that concerns allowing people to lead a life that they value and enabling them to realize their potentials as human beings. The normative framework for human development has also been reflected in the broad vision set out in the Millennium Development Goals, the internationally agreed set of time-bound goals for reducing extreme poverty, extending gender equality and advancing opportunities for health and education (UNDP 2012:4). Progress towards achieving the above objectives offers a benchmark for assessing the international community's resolve in translating commitments into concrete reality. With the Millennium Development Goals in perspective, more vigorous and global attention is being paid to the pursuit of gender sensitive policies. To this end, the need to enhance the capacity of development planners and other policy advocates to understand how gender relations operate in their interface and at various levels has been canvassed (FMWASD 2011:2).

In Nigeria, some commendable efforts have been made to put in place the necessary mechanisms required for the elimination of gender discrimination so as to ensure gender equality and human dignity to all and sundry. The National Gender Policy, which replaced and reinforced the previous National Policy on women, is particularly targeted at the gender inequality problematic in Nigeria. Beyond the growing concern and somewhat determined policy efforts directed toward the global gender gap palaver, however, is the dysfunctional role that the global phenomenon will play in accentuating the family and social dislocation that industrialization and its engendered family pressures have created.

## 2. The Family as a Social Institution

Societies can be viewed as a social system that is made up of various subsystems that play vital roles necessary for the maintenance and functionality of social systems. An institution is also a cluster of social structure, which is organized for the purpose of meeting the basic needs of society. The family institution primarily performs this function. Every society essentially attempts to socialize its members and distributes various tasks into the hands of several groups or institutions, which are described as agents of socialization. The institution of the family has been acknowledged universally as the oldest institution in the history of human existence (Ezewu 2012:36). It is also globally recognized as the primary agency of socialization. It is, in fact, the foundation of the total development of the human specie. The family which is a group of persons directly linked by kin connections

with the adult members assuming the responsibility for the care of the children (Giddens and Duneier 2010:336) is very critical to the formation, development and the functioning of societies. The family in the traditional fashion was seen as a supportive unit in which people recognized their place; children respected their parents and the authority of parents over their children was firm (Giddens and Duneier 2010:338). Studies have also shown that warm, supportive and relatively contracting family environments usually produce happy and well-behaved children, while a cold, rigid and coercively restrictive type constitute a source of rebellious, resentful and unsecured children.

### **3. Functionalist Perspective of the Family**

From the functionalist perspective, the family is the foundation of the social order because it fulfills vital functions including defining and limiting who has sexual access to whom, reproducing new members, integrating them into the social system and continuously replacing dying members providing for the care and support of the young, infant and elderly; socializing new members; providing people with ascribed statuses - social class, race and ethnicity that determine their place in society; and providing people with emotional support, a sense of belonging and fulfillment (Havilland 2012 :17; Thompson and Hickey 2012:377). They posit that every family type does not produce social benefits and those that deviate from normative expectations or produce instability are dysfunctional (Thompson and Hickey 2012:378). The functionalist perspective contends that the typical nuclear family pattern is mandated by the requirements of industrial society. Industrialization is based on free labour market and a flexible, mobile workforce, In summary, functionalism seems to offer a comprehensive theory that explains the essential characteristics of the family as it is known in industrialized societies (Hale 2009:328).

The functionalist theory of the family has however been criticized primarily for elevating a historically specific form of family into a universal principle. The theory, which ignores the wide variety of family forms, renders a rigid definition of the family such as that proposed by Murdoch useless. The core of the challenge came from the Marxist and Feminist theorists who described the functionalist perspective as an ideology that seeks to justify the status quo while ignoring the ways in which family life is arbitrarily constrained by narrowly defined interests associated with capitalism and patriarchy (Hale 2009:329). These interests, according to the Marxists and feminists, who exploit women as cheap labour at home is supported by the functionalists by legitimating it as if it were unavoidable and universal. In fact, the functional explanation of the family is criticized as monolithic, conservative, sexist and micro-structural biases (Eichler 2009:17). Eichler, for instance, criticized the traditional conception of the family for its pervasive focus on the changes that are transforming family life.

#### **3.1 The Marxist-Conflict Perspective of the Family**

The conflict theorists, on the other hand, opine that environmental and other forces shape family institutions. They also stress that they are rooted in the structures of social inequality (Eitzen and Bacazinn 2009:13). From the conflict dimension, family is not a static world of cooperative and harmony designed to serve the common good, but arenas of conflict in families and family members struggle for wealth, power, prestige and relevance (Engels 1982:5) referring to it as an instrument of power and oppression by which men advance their interests and privileges at the-expense of women (Collins 2010:13). With the emergence of highly stratified agrarian states, women according to the conflict theorists came to be defined as mere “property” to be disposed of at the pleasure of men. Even in the contemporary industrial societies where women made great strides in the twentieth century, male privilege persists in family relationships. Marxist feminists argue that in contemporary society, the oppression of women is, in fact, vital to patriarchy and capitalism. The Marxist approach to sociology of the family challenges the supposed micro-structural bias of traditional functionalist theory and argued that both the organization of economic production in the wider society and the way people earn their living critically influence the organization of family life.

### **4. The Radicalist Feminist Critique: Capitalism or Patriarchy**

Although the radical feminist perspective accepts the Marxist appreciation of the impact of capitalism on family life, they opposed the narrow, deterministic focus on political economy as the cause of family structures. They posit that this tunnel vision of traditional Marxists provides inadequate attention to relations of patriarchy or gender hierarchy that cannot be subsumed under capitalism. They challenged especially the more deterministic version of Marxist theory, sometimes referred to as Marxist structuralism that explains family structures by reference to their functions in the capitalist system. Marxist contends, for example, that privatization of women at home occurs because it is functional for capitalism (Armstrong and Armstrong 2009:10). Capitalism is based

on free way labour that demands the separation of a public, commodity - production unit from a private subsistence unit in which free laborers are reproduced and maintained, hence the subordination of women appears to be a prerequisite for the capitalist system. The Marxist also described the position of women as a reserve army of labour that can be stored cheaply within the home as necessary for the capitalist system. The implications of this position are that the privatization of women was not evident in the pre-capitalist era. Radicalist feminists opined that the evidence does not support the above position, for in pre-capitalist societies, the economy may have centered on domestic production in which women were involved, but this did not guarantee gender equality, whether in family practice or society.

## **5. Political Gender Inequality in Nigeria**

According to Durerger (cited in Nziome 2--8:15), if majority of women are little attracted to political careers, it is because everything tends to turn them away from them, and if they allow politics to remain essentially a man's business, it is because everything is conducive to this belief: tradition, family life, education, religion and literature. The small part played by women in politics, he added, merely reflects and results from the secondary place to which they are assigned by the customs and attitudes of our society and which their education and training tend to make them accept as the natural order of things. In both developing and advanced democracies, concerted efforts have been made to improve the lots of women. In the United States of America and the United Kingdom that had 3.7 and 2.9 percent of female representatives in 1980, progress was made to 9.0 and 9.1 percent in 1994. Although Norway and Sweden had as much as 38 percent representatives, Nigeria had only 3 percent in 1992/93 (Nwankwo 2009:1). However, the Nigerian situation concerning women representation in both elective and appointive positions has slightly improved. Justifying why more women should participate in decision-making, the United Nations (UN 2010:15) in its World Survey on the "Role of Women in Development", observed that there are many reasons why there should be more women in decision-making positions. The UN which also reported that women occupied six percent of ministerial positions in the US government in 1993 attributed the problems to the lack of recruiting and career development programmes for women and male - oriented corporate cultures that create obstacles to women's promotions (Aita 2005:8).

The problem of low participation by women in politics and decision-making position is not confined to any region or clime, for the so-called paucity of women in politics and public decision-making positions is therefore a global phenomenon. In line with the Article of the UN 1948 Declaration on Human Rights, all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights (United Nations 1948:17). Beyond these legalistic efforts toward gender inequality, inequality is believed to be firmly embedded in most fundamental aspects of society (IDEA 2010:107-124). In the Nigeria context, it is not only that the culture which evolved expects women to take care of the home, their husbands and children; the lowly position of women was more importantly inspired by the scriptures which states that "The Lord God said, it is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him a help mate for him; I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully; thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee and wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands as unto the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church (Holy Bible 2011: 6, 7, 1104 and 1089). These scriptural injunctions are suggestive of the fact that man occupies a superior position over women and that the church of Jesus Christ is male-dominated. Aside the scriptural premise for understanding male domination over the female, most societies, particular in Africa, are innately patriarchal in nature. This patriarchal culture is male-dominated in traditionally social, cultural, economic and religious realms or settings. Because of the God-given responsibilities to women, they are not naturally or traditionally predisposed toward socio-political activities.

The patriarchic nature of the African culture that encourages the exclusion of women from the political sphere is interpreted as a demonstration of their passion, love and care for their families. Although, liberal democracy permits full participation of women in politics through voting and holding of elective and appointive offices, but women are still at the periphery of real politicking (Ojo 2009:334). One plausible explanation for this disconnection of women from the mainstream of politics, despite the demands and expectations of liberal democracy for the gender parity in politics, is gender stereotypes and predisposition toward women participation in politics. Rather than accord it a descriptive label of oppression, it is appropriate to understand it from the perspective of innate feelings, consciousness and reactions that is in consonance with divine scriptural, biblical, traditional and cultural premises. This position contradicts the somewhat shallow explanation of the greatest militating factor against gender parity or discrimination in politics from the dimension of the incorrect perception of the "role of self by women advanced by Ojo (2009:335).

## **6. Industrialization and Family/Social Dislocation**

Industrialization as well as the economic demands and pressures of the family made women employment not only desirable, but equally inevitable. This necessity, which has interrupted the critical role and principle essence of women in the family setting, has caused family and social dislocation. This contention is premised on the understanding that women as home-keepers are supposed to mould their children through childhood, infancy to adolescence stages which are critical to child development morally, socially, educationally and culturally. The existing gaps in the Nigerian family setting or milieu occasioned by the separation of women from their homes and their marital responsibilities has contributed largely to the malfunctioning of the homes with its spill-over effects on the family and the society. Family and social problems are therefore a condition affecting a significant number of people in the family and society in ways considered undesirable. The above social problems manifest in armed robbery/prostitution, and criminality and delinquency, violence, women trafficking, drug abuse, child abuse and deviance (Obaro 2004:73). In fact, the two major threats to any social system are infants who have not been socialized and individuals who are motivated to deviance or non-conformity (Lockwood 2009:6).

The social problems, which are an outgrowth of the family dislocation arising from the distractions experienced by women due to family social and economic pressures that attended industrial dispensation, are inimical to the realization of societal norms and values and therefore an abnormal social condition (Nathman 2012: 15). It is important to stress that lack of parental oversight due to excessive industrial engagement leads to juvenile delinquency that is a manifestation of deviance. Deviance and crime that are a violation of the law, challenges the foundations of the social order itself and they reflect the level of anomie or moral breakdown within society (Hale 2009:192). Thus, parental neglect can be described as one of the broken windows that analyses the social situation that criminals, deviants, delinquents and non-conformists are faced with (Wilson and Kelling 2010: 19).

## **7. Changing Family Patterns**

There is clearly a diversity of family forms in different societies across the globe (Giddens and Duneier 2010: 339). In Africa, just like in Asia and the Pacific, traditional family systems are little altered. In fact, widespread changes are occurring in most third world countries. The origins of these are complex, but several factors are particularly important and identifiable. The first factor is the spread of western culture to societies where they were previously unknown. Another factor is the development of centralized government in areas previously composed of autonomous smaller societies. People's lives resultantly became influenced by their involvement in national politics and governments made concerted efforts to change traditional patterns of behavior. Yet another factor is large-scale migration from rural to urban areas, which weakened traditional family systems, and probably the most important is industrialization.

Notably, industrial firms tended to have disruptive consequences for family systems previously centered on landed production in the local community. These global changes have culminated in a general trend toward free choice of a spouse and the increasing recognition of the rights of women (Giddens and Duneier 2010: 334). Industrialization and its concomitant family pressures have also created social dislocation even in Africa. Family arrangements or settings are simply changing to keep pace with rapid economic, technological and social changes. The family has, in fact, changed for the worse (Rutgers cited in Giddens and Duneier 2010: 363). Divorce, non-marital births and cohabitation rates have increased and these trends are at the root of countless social ills, including child poverty, adolescent pregnancy, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and other social problems. Even though post-modern family is better suited to meet the challenges of the current modern economy, the traditional family is not the only panacea for all social problems. All the same, industrialization has caused a collapse of value system, and there is the need to recover the moral sense of family life. Moreover, the traditional family was much more suitable and ordered than the tangled web of relationships that industrialization has engendered.

Accepted that women cannot be totally confined or restricted to domestic responsibilities because of the increasing demands of the family; family values must be restored despite the contention that the family is becoming democratized in ways that parallel processes of political democracy and that such democratization connotes how family life might combine individual choice and social solidarity (Giddens and Duneier 2010: 365). Democratization in the context of the family implies equality, mutual respect, and autonomy and decision-making through communication and freedom that contradicts the scriptural premise upon which the traditional family mentality and construct is based. Although the tendency is for sociologists to regard the above scriptural



premise as a mythological justification for the inferior position of women in society, it could also be argued that it is an explanation of why women cannot achieve parity with men in terms of participation in politics. Although the Quran stipulated that there is no distinction between men and women, but in practice the Islamic culture see women as helpers to men and does not encourage women activism, even in politics. They are, in fact, not encouraged to pursue western education which could enhance their role and participation in the political terrain (Othner 2012:31; Vott 2012:67-69). Even the African tradition religion in which the Nigerian traditional culture is embedded presupposes the inferiority of women to men in all facets of human endeavours.

#### **8. The Dysfunctional Role of Political Gender Equality in Nigeria**

Although political gender inequality is an aspect of human development since it presupposes equal access to opportunities in all facets of human endeavours, it has the potency of creating gaps in the family institution because of the abdication of the home-keeping and child-raising responsibilities that it engenders. Worse still, is the tendency that political gender equality has to accentuate the family dislocation which industrialization has occasioned not only in Nigeria, but also across the globe. The dislocation of the family in Nigeria that is at the micro level has manifested in juvenile delinquency so much so that the family institution is weakened in the context of its critical role in the molding, shaping and functioning of the Nigerian society. The link between the detachment of women from their matrimonial homes due to industrialization and family dislocation has, in fact, been underscored. Mayo (1933:15) inspired by Durkheim and Pareto, for instance, developed his general philosophy about the problems of industrial civilization. These problems, according to him, emanate mainly from the social disorganization caused by industrialization and resulted in the weakening of the family. At the micro level, juvenile delinquency has culminated in social crime including armed robbery, criminality, and drug abuse and trafficking, prostitution, vandalism and the like. Thus, when family problems at the micro level assume a social dimension that affects the relationships among people and resultantly disturb the social order, they are appropriately described as social problems as Merton and Nisbet (1966:12) rightly articulated. Also, Merton's (cited in Giddens and Duneier 2010:124) interpretation of crime that links criminality to deviant behaviour explains the dysfunctional role of women distraction from the family due to industrialization in Nigeria. In fact, the menace of youth restiveness in Nigeria has been largely explained from many perspectives and in many contexts, as if parental role abdication and neglect has played no significant role at all. Rather, one important dimension, which provides a useful explanation for youth restiveness and its multi-faceted manifestation, is parental delinquency caused largely by industrialization and female political activism.

#### **9. Concluding Remarks**

Anthropologists and historians have found that most groups, collectives; and societies throughout history differentiate between women's and men's societal roles. Although there are considerable variations in the respective roles of women and men in different cultures, there is no known instance of a society in which women are more powerful than men. Women are everywhere primarily concerned with child rearing and the maintenance of the home, while political and military activities tend to be resoundingly male. Just because women and men perform different tasks or have different responsibilities in societies does not necessarily mean that women are oppressed or marginalized by men. In modern societies, the division of labour between the sexes has become less clear-cut than it was in pre-modern cultures, but men still outnumber women in all spheres of power and influence.

Arguably, therefore, political gender inequality or disparity is not the fault of the men; it is not oppression against the women; it is not marginalization or denial of equal access to the political space in Nigeria; it is simply and evidently naturalness or originality. It therefore follows that political gender equality is a struggle against not only traditionalism or the traditional conception of women subjection and subordination to men, but in conflict with naturalness, originality and the divine premise as well as its position on the role of men and women. Thus, instead of making efforts to enlarge the space of women in the political terrain to such an extent that parity or equality is attained, women's engagement outside the home should be minimized or reduced by law so that they can be more engaged at home which is their primary responsibility and where their attention is more importantly needed. Although this contention may be labeled as traditional parochialism, it is, in actuality, in tandem with the realities of nature which political gender equality fundamentally contradicts and threatens. However, to cushion the effects of the economic pressures and demands on the Nigerian families, social grants can be paid by the government to married women who are obligated to support their husbands in the maintenance of their homes and the social and economic functioning of their families.

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